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SUBJECT: ARMENIA GRANTS LEGAL STANDING TO THE ARMENIAN CHURCH

¶1. The Armenian Church, which counts among its fold the vast majority of Armenians both in the homeland and in the diaspora, until earlier this month had no legal standing in Armenia. A law signed March 14 by the president granted legal standing, but did not grant the Church status as the only state church. The law stems from the November 2005 constitutional referendum, which determined that there should be a formal agreement between the church and the state.

¶2. According to Fr. Ktrij Devejian, spokesman for the Mother See of Echmiadzin, the law institutionalizes the Armenian Church as the national church of Armenia. For the first time, the Church's marriage rites will be legally binding in Armenia; before, couples had to pay a prenuptial visit to the civil registration office to legalize their unions. The law also establishes confessor-penitent confidentiality, and assigns the Church and the state joint

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responsibility to preserve national historic churches. The law does not exempt the Church from taxes, nor does it establish any state funding for the Church, which mainly lives off donations from the Diaspora. The law does not grant the Church property rights.

¶3. According to Fr. Ktrij, the Church advocated for the bill because Catholicos Karekin II believed it was important to establish state authority over the Church, and to end 15 years of operating without legal standing.

¶4. COMMENT: Though the Church operated in legal limbo for 15 years, its relationship with the government has been generally free of strife. This law primarily serves to acknowledge the role the Church already plays in Armenian society.

GODFREY